

Warrendale: holding sessions

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Warrendale concerns a group of severely disturbed children and adolescents resident at a therapy centre on the outskirts of Toronto. Managed by John L. Brown (a senior social worker and political activist for Ontario's centre-left New Democratic Party (NDP)), and its psychiatric director, Dr. Martin Fischer (a child psychiatrist who specialised in play and art therapies), the Warrendale facility had been attracting controversy since the late 1950s; largely because its experimental treatment programme involved therapeutic holding and intensive re-parenting techniques, and encouraged physical contact between the young people and their carers and psychiatrists. (In this respect, King's film is also an interesting precursor to more contemporary documentaries on a similar subject, such as Kim Longinotto's *Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go* (2009, UK), or *Who Cares About Kelsey?* (Dan Habib, 2012), for example.) While child psychiatry and developmental psychology had become increasingly urgent fields of research after WWII, serious studies on the effects of therapeutic holding and physical intervention in the treatment of disturbed and traumatised children were still thin on the ground. The methods deployed at Warrendale were influenced by theories associated with the problem of infantile emotional deprivation (René Spitz), group dynamics (Fritz Redl), milieu therapy (Bruno Bettelheim), and attachment (John Bowlby), as well as those elucidating the psycho-dramatic complexities of the modern family (namely, Laing, Goffman, Bateson, and others). The "holding sessions" involved one or more carers using both their arms and legs to forcibly cradle the upset child or teenager, while simultaneously allowing them to give full vent to their feelings of anger and frustration without physically hurting themselves or others. In being restrained in this way, the children were actively encouraged to express their emotions as fully—and forcibly—as possible, with a view to enabling them to develop a stronger sense of trust in "parental" constraint and thus, begin to feel more secure in their relationship with benevolent authority.

For Brown, Fischer and the other carers involved in the Warrendale project, this degree of therapeutic tactility and physical interaction transformed how the children perceived their therapists and social workers, creating a "safe space" for

them to revisit traumatic experiences of parental/social neglect, abandonment, anxiety, and abuse, and to explore and openly talk about what might be triggering their often distraught responses to given, everyday “household” situations. Although Brown and Fischer did not withhold tranquilizing medication from the young people in their care, they were committed to replacing pharmacological interventions with more holistic and behavioural forms of child psychotherapy. All of which made Warrendale an opportune subject for a filmmaker like King, who “on numerous occasions [...] disclosed that his formative experience of family disintegration during early childhood in the Depression influenced his lifelong filmic preoccupations” (Druick

Citation

2010, 3).

Initially trained and employed by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC Vancouver), King’s early works, such as *Skidrow* (1956), *The Pemberton Valley* (1958), *A Matter of Pride* (1961), or *The Pursuit of Happiness: Beyond the Welfare State* (1962) centred on homelessness, social disintegration, poverty and unemployment. While he would go on to have a varied career as an independent filmmaker, it was the television documentary format that best suited his talents and temperament, a format that by the 1960s had become increasingly open to some measure of *vérité* experimentation; as in, for example, CBC’s 1958 popular series, *Candid Eye*, or its successor, the *Documentary ’60* series (see, Hogarth

Citation

2002, 69–80). King’s major films from this period offered a perspective on social reality—especially, in relation to Vancouver’s less than generous welfare provision—at odds with the progressive self-image the province was trying to project, leaving his relationship with CBC—one of the principal purveyors of that image—somewhat strained. By the end of the 1950s he had set up his own production company, A.K.A. (Allan King Associates); and although still working largely for CBC, commissions and freelance contracts at that time promised him greater editorial and creative independence, and permitted him to retain the theatrical distribution rights for his films (which proved important in the case of

Warrendale). These new working arrangements also provided him with more scope to develop a distinctive style of documentary filmmaking. For example, although *Warrendale* was originally commissioned by Patrick Watson and George Desmond for CBC, its seemingly loose observational approach contrasts markedly with CBC's *The Disordered Mind* multi-series (1960–66, Robert Anderson Associates), which comprised conventional public service documentaries aimed at informing (reassuring) the Canadian public about the positive role of medical and statutory bodies in treating severe mental illness, regardless of its more complex causes and sociology. The third *Disordered Mind* series was broadcast in autumn 1966 and focused on the treatment of profoundly disturbed young people; and perhaps King had these episodes in mind when he remarked that *Warrendale* was not simply “a demonstration of treatment [...], treatment is the *modus vivendi* of the environment in which the filming occurs, but it is not the subject matter of the film” (Warrendale Press Pack

Citation

1967).

Although King's observational style—in keeping with contemporary Canadian and French *vérité* practices—eschewed the illusion of illustrative or expository objectivity in favour a more openly collaborative approach, he claimed that the human element was paramount to everything he did:

A lot of *cinéma vérité* hinged on the drama that came from the event. You have to find a sufficient tension within a work to sustain the length of what you want to explore. But for me, it's always been about people, my fascination has always been with individual people or individual people within the group—personal actuality drama, if you will. (Blaine, Feldman, and Hardcourt

Citation

2002, 88–89)

In conceiving of documentary as “personal actuality drama”, King invested considerable time and energy into developing close relationships with both his

production crew and the individuals featuring in his films. Ahead of shooting *Warrendale*, for example, he spent over a month visiting the centre and getting to know some of the young people and staff, before introducing them to the film's cameraman and sound engineer (Bill Brayne and Russ Heise), who then visited with him every day for a further couple of weeks. Not solely in attendance to "demonstrate the Warrendale treatment", King actively sought to integrate his filmmaking project into the everyday life of the centre, rather than contriving fly-on-the-wall detachment. This commitment to democratic, informal and somewhat free-wheeling observational filmmaking was also perhaps influenced by his association with contemporary Beat culture, experimental theatre, and the bohemian communities in Ibiza and London: "King was of a generation that came of age in the 1950s, and his interest in observational cinema was influenced by both psychotherapy and the Living Theatre" (Druick

Citation

2010, 4). His endorsement of various communal and experimental ways of living readily coincided with the forms of therapy being developed at Warrendale, where the attempt to create a radically empathetic relationship between the young residents and their therapists sought to protect that environment from the authoritarian structures and objectifying processes characteristic of other—more typical—mental healthcare regimes.

The film was shot over five weeks, producing forty hours of footage, edited into a 100-minute production (which CBC duly refused to broadcast, largely because King would not agree to edit out instances of the children swearing). Comprised of twenty "episodes", *Warrendale* culminates in the children's reactions to the sudden death of the house cook, Dorothy, and their attendance at her funeral; a very popular figure in the house, she is described at one point in the film by the senior social worker (Walter Gunn) as "a cook-mother ... the only service staff involved in the programme", and the news of her death provokes extreme responses in some of the older children and teenagers. Although initially shaped around a "Day in the Life" format, King readily restructured the latter parts of the film to enhance the impact of the reactions to Dorothy's death—an event that actually took place much earlier in the production schedule, a manipulation of real-time chronology that

exemplifies how King's method seems to diverge from the tenets of classic *cinéma vérité*; although it is perhaps also important not to exaggerate the nature and extent of this divergence—reality is often stranger than documentary, and as William Rothman remarks in his essay, "Eternal Vérités": "In every *cinéma vérité* moment, the filmmaker happens on a situation so sublimely poignant [...] that we can hardly believe the stroke of fortune that reveals the world's astonishing genius for improvisation" (Rothman

Citation

2004, 297). Other aspects of the film also pressurised its observational mode towards fictionality and dramatized actuality.

Although initially scripted by Watson and King, the film contains no commentary, interviews, title music (bar a curious wobble-effect insert during the end title sequence) or other non-diegetic elements. However, *Warrendale*'s formal austerity does not so much underwrite its observational integrity as create a blank theatrical backdrop against which personalities and conflicts emerge more vividly. While its *mise en scène* was also influenced by practical considerations (such as integrating a small crew into a confined environment, and the need to minimise intrusive hand-held shooting and cumbersome sound recording set-ups), *Warrendale* is especially attentive to how the presence of the camera inevitably blurs distinctions between candid and contrived modes of behaviour, and how this affects the behaviour of the children, as well as that of their carers and therapists. Take, for example, the opening segment of the film, comprising three sequences: the children being woken up for breakfast, followed by them going to school in another building within the facility; and then a "closed" meeting between John Brown and three carers (Gunn, Terri Adler, and Maurice Flood).



Figure 1. Warrendale (Warrendale Press Pack Citation 1967): Carol being held by Terri and Walter during a holding session—the controversial therapeutic intervention associated with the Warrendale facility.

The film's opening title sequence is a long aerial shot, presumably taken from a fixed camera position on the roof of an adjacent tower block, framing Adler's car as it arrives at the centre, and pulls up outside "House Two". As if to accentuate the contrast between exterior and interior worlds, perspective and scale, the subsequent shot is hand-held and taken from inside the kitchen of the house, with a kettle (ominously) coming to the boil in the foreground and Adler visible in the background—initially, through the kitchen window—as she hurriedly enters the house, greets a colleague and throws off her coat, before the hand-held camera follows her upstairs (often out of frame, and with erratic sound quality) as she endeavours to coax some of the children out of bed, and encourage others to go down for their breakfast. The camera continues to follow Terri into one of the bedrooms, where she draws open the curtains and picks up a cup and a baby-bottle (which belongs to Irene, a teenage girl). A radio or record player can be heard loudly in the background (playing the Rolling Stones' "Play with Fire"), as Carol

(another teenager) angrily resists Terri's attempts to get her out of bed. She becomes increasingly irritated by Terri, and refuses to budge. This situation results in a holding session, in which Terri and Maurice force Carol out from under the blanket and hold her. At this point, Walter arrives and replaces both Terri and Maurice in holding Carol. The framing also changes from rough and unsteady medium shots of Terri and Maurice grappling with Carol, to closer shots of her, and of Walter, culminating in an extreme close-up of Carol as she appears to relax, comforted rather than contained by Walter's holding (Figure 1). The film then cuts to a medium shot of Walter and Terri (now downstairs) discussing whether Carol should go to school that day, followed by Walter playfully lifting Tony (a young boy, who—like Carol—will become one of the film's principal characters), followed by a very long shot of the children walking together to the school building, with Tony waving and shouting at King and his crew from a distance.

This opening segment concludes with a sequence taken from a meeting later that day involving Terri, Walter, and John Brown. The meeting focuses on Terri's management of Carol that morning, and involves Brown (framed in a number of close shots) carefully chastising Terry and warning against "the dangers of precipitous holding", advising her how to relate to Carol in a more therapeutically effective way. Although running at just over three minutes in duration, Brown is rarely out of the frame in this scene, and even a brief frontal medium close-up of Terri includes his expressive hand movements in the foreground. When Walter interjects to add support to Brown's concerns about Terri's relationship with Carol, there is no cut as the camera smoothly pans right to frame Walter in a similar medium close-up, signifying continuity and consensus. Throughout the sequence, which is the only one featuring Brown in the entire film, King's *mise en scène* unambiguously affirms Brown's authority, his role as a mentor-manager and his centrality to the entire Warrendale project. In a later sequence, Carol and Tony are filmed with Terri and Dr. Martin Fischer (described in the titles as the facility's "Medical Psychiatric Director"). In this instance, hand-held cinematography and a general atmosphere of playfulness and informality prevails, as Fischer talks to Tony about his home town or encourages Carol to write some letters to her family. There is an intentional contrapuntality between this scene and the earlier one involving Brown: here, King seems to want his audience to see the theory being put into

practice, and the beneficial effects of this novel therapy on the children—and on Terri, which is important given that the film is as much about the carers, therapists and social workers as it is about the children and young people resident in the facility (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Warrendale (Warrendale Press Pack Citation 1967): A facial close-up of Carol—exemplifying the film’s preference for careful composition and “personal actuality drama” over naïve cinema vérité techniques.

Although King would bring his “personal actuality drama” approach to a more controversial level in his next film, *A Married Couple* (1969), *Warrendale* demonstrates observational filmmaking as an essentially creative process of shaping and negotiating whatever reality it finds itself encountering, a process seemingly predicated as much on a dramatic imperative as a documentary one. However, within the context of the film’s subject matter—and the remit of this essay—such an approach remains problematic. Despite itself, for example, *Warrendale* reinforces stereotypical images of mentally disturbed children, and the hand-held framing and use of close shots during sequences showing their emotional outbursts, tantrums, and violence dramatizes this behaviour in ways that

immediately provide the audience with a *clinical*—privileged—perspective on what is happening. There is a thin line between dramatized actuality and “actuality drama”, and in the case of *Warrendale* everyone is performing: the therapists and psychiatrists—including, Brown—are as conscious of the filmmaker’s presence as the young residents. Needless to say, at no point do the makers of the film hand the camera over to the young people, or challenge the authority of therapy (or documentary) per se; on the contrary, they are there to endorse—formally, as well as politically—the therapeutic methods associated with John Brown’s project.